

## A vote is worth more than a hill of buttons

by BROCK WEIR

How much pull does a lapel pin have?

I don't mean the pop culture-style enamel pins that are making something of a comeback these days as people look for more artistic ways to pay tribute to their hobbies, passions, and fandoms. Rather, I'm referring to those often-round plastic numbers with metal backing that can be churned out by the hundreds, or pressed one at a time by a fully-manual punching machine that hasn't changed much since their advent in the late Victorian era.

?Not much,? you might answer. But, go to any flea market, or an antique store that gravitates more towards the tchotchkes of our lives than grand, beautiful pieces of furniture, you'll likely find baskets and bins of disused pins commemorating everything from a campaign waged by a municipal politician time has nearly forgot, to promotion of a new spin on a venerable caffeinated pop, to pun-tastic numbers with slogans and jokes that you can only read if you get right up in the wearer's face.

Yet, I remember a time when buttons alone were able to sway an entire election.

Back when I was in Grade 6, an exciting Federal election was taking place and our teachers ? our school's two Grade 6 classes were a strange, brief exercise in ?team teaching? ? were thoroughly bitten by the political bug.

Almost as soon as the writ was dropped, we students were divided into groups to represent each of the political parties that were represented on our local ballot. Within the group, we appointed ?party leaders? from amongst ourselves, and these lucky winners were tasked with emulating the party leaders of the time rather than flying their own flag. (I wonder if Jean Chretien, Preston Manning, Gilles Duceppe, Alexa McDonough, and Jean Charest ever had an inkling how walking a few steps in their respective shoes was a make-or-break moment in a student's social standing in this very specific microcosm)

Then, the local candidates representing each party visited our class to make the case on why our in-class vote should go their way.

Each of them made their pitches with passion and conviction and gave us a lot to think about before ?polls opened? later that afternoon.

Who won our in-class vote? It wasn't the Liberals, Reform, BQ, NDP, or Progressive Conservatives. It was the Christian Heritage Party that won the day ? and it wasn't a statement on whether our class leaned left or right, or where our religious convictions lay. Instead, it all came down to the clever local CHP candidate who, in addition to speaking with us, brought bags and bags of party swag for us with him.

And there it was ? an election that came down to a hill of beans, er, buttons.

It was not, of course, the most sophisticated way to gauge the pulse of students with even the slightest of political inclinations, but we were young, unsophisticated, and living in an era where Beanie Babies and POGs were traded like currency, so kudos to the CHP candidate for ?getting? his electorate and introduced a new trading token into our schoolyard economy!

While everyone likes swag to some degree, I think it's pretty clear that the youth of today are far more sophisticated and politically savvy today than we were back when the 1997 Federal Election unfurled across the country.

Today's youth are more tuned in to the issues that matter than ever before. While some might be more susceptible to A.I. and so-called fake news than others, by and large, have, in my observation, not only a firm grasp on the issues that matter but no shortage of great ideas to foster the change they want to see in the world.

With this in mind, I was very interested in an announcement made last week by British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, outlining his intention to lower the U.K.'s voting age to 16.

'Prime Minister Keir Starmer said young people who 'pay into' the system should have the opportunity to say what they want their money to be spent on,' the BBC reported. 'Conservative MP Paul Holmes hit back at the government's announcement, arguing there would be no opportunity for parliamentary scrutiny until September due to the recess ' describing the proposal as 'hopelessly confused.' Leader of Reform UK, Nigel Farage, said he didn't support lowering the voting age to 16 'even though we get lots of votes.' And Lib Dem MP Sarah Olney said changing the minimum voting age to 16 was a 'no brainer.'

The BBC went on to speak to 16- and 17-year-olds on how this proposal was going over in their demographic, as well as pollsters, who speculated on just how different the results of their last Federal election might have been if this age change was in place at the time (spoiler alert: not much), and whether this age group, which would account for just two per cent of the electorate, would even care.

'It's not a huge amount and we know that younger people are slightly less likely to vote than older generations,' pollster Luke Tryl told the BBC. 'But, then again, we are in an era where small shares of the vote can deliver you lots of seats and multi-party politics.'

We don't have to search too hard in this country for prime examples where a small number of votes turned out to make a big difference ' the most recent examples being the recounts that had to take place in a number of ridings after our last trip to the polls on April 28.

That being said, however, I'm not sure I buy the idea of younger people being slightly less likely to vote than older generations being a permanent situation.

Should Canada ever consider following the United Kingdom's lead in lowering the voting age, there will be a lot of questions that will need to be answered before such a change is implemented, but at first blush ' well, most current blush, as this is far from a new idea ' I think the pros significantly outweigh the cons.

Starmer, in my view, is correct that young people who pay into the system should have an opportunity to have a say on where their money is spent. If a 16-year-old is expected to pay taxes on the money they earn from their part-time jobs ' and, let's be real, lucrative 'side-hustles' are fast becoming the norm ' it's hard to find a valid argument on why they shouldn't be able to help shape the system, particularly when their peers who are just two years older, have the same privilege.

There might be a prevailing idea that younger people are 'slightly less likely to vote than older generations,' but perhaps at least a part of that can be attributed to the current voting requirements and the missed opportunity to instill civic duty ' and, most importantly, engagement ' from an earlier age.

Should Britain's plans come to fruition, the results of this significant shift will be worth watching. In the meantime, however, don't feel compelled to bust out the button-maker.